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What Do Students Know About The Effect of Gender on Work?

Senior Project

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
The Esther G. Maynor Honors College  
University of North Carolina at Pembroke

By

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May 1, 2019

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### Abstract

This project is an exploration into what students at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke know about the ways that gender affects work and workplace policies. Students were interviewed individually and asked to answer questions about scenarios that dealt with interviews, discrimination, sexual harassment, rights in the workplace, and the glass ceiling. The results showed no distinct patterns occurring in a certain age, gender, major, place of origin, or whether the person had job experience. No participant was able to answer every question correctly and without guessing. This shows a lack of knowledge in policies that could soon affect them as they enter the work world. Educational seminars and classes in human resource practices is suggested as a way to prepare these students for situations that could occur.

## What Do Students Know About The Effect of Gender on Work?

### Introduction

This research project is an investigation into what students at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke (UNCP) know about the ways that gender affects work. In the United States, there is a history of workplace discrimination against groups of people based on their sex or gender. It was not unheard of for a job listing to explicitly state that they did not hire women or for an organization to dismiss an employee because of their gender identity (A Brief History of Gender Discrimination Laws and Milestones). Sexual harassment was common and uninvestigated. In a Human Resources class that I took, it was clear that the majority of the students did not know about the policies that are in place to protect them from discrimination and prevent them from participating in discriminatory practices. I also took a class on gender in society that touched on the lasting impact that gender has on labor now as a result of the practices that were most workplaces participated in. The intention is to see how much my participants know, discover what they think, and inform them of the answers, which could affect them in the future.

### Literature Review

Gender is socially constructed. The ideas that people have about how a person should behave based on the sex that they were assigned at birth are cultivated by culture and history in a society. Gender is the behavior that people act out to live up to these expectations. In some instances, people, transgender individuals for example, do not present their gender to match the expectations of the sex assigned to them. As a result of gender being constructed in a way that often puts certain groups at a disadvantage, there have been laws enacted (Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964) that place these groups in a protected class (EEOC). A person cannot be discriminated against on the basis of sex, race, color, religion, creed, national origin, ancestry, age, physical or mental disability, or veteran status, and they can sue an organization if there is reason to believe that they have been.

Gender can have an impact on your success in your career. Women will often be met with an invisible barrier called the glass ceiling that keeps them from having the same success as their male counterparts (Kimmel). This barrier is due to institutions that have put males in places of power and painted women as incapable of producing the same results. There is also a glass escalator that puts men on "track" toward more prestigious positions. Women are not given a career advancing track. Due to family structures that place child care in the hands of women, their career development is often impeded.

There is a pay gap that exists between men and women. Careers that are typically held by women, like teachers and social workers, are often paid less than male dominated fields, like doctors and corporate business. Very few women are able to break through into the upper positions within their organizations that make more money and have more responsibility. There is also the time lost in advancing their careers due to being "mommy tracked" and the perceived value of an employee that employers do not believe will provide as much time, effort, and output for them.

Employees and possible employees are now entitled to many protections to counteract the discrimination perpetrated against them (SHRM). Women, who used to be fired when they were pregnant and needed to take time off, are now protected under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA). There is an agency, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which is independent from the organizations that people are employed at that can investigate sexual harassment cases. When a people go for an interview, they can avoid revealing things about themselves that an employer could use against them. They do not have to reveal their marital status, their family situation, or their gender identity.

### **Method**

My experiences and interactions in the human resource class made me curious about my peers' knowledge about the policies and research addressed above. Therefore, I set out to investigate the research question: how aware are UNCP students of workplace policies related to gender? I decided to use interviews as the method to collect data. After deciding on a method I wanted to use to collect information, I started to formulate the questions I wanted to ask my participants to answer my research question. The first set questions I came up with included several scenarios as well as some direct questions that could have appeared on a quiz or test. After some consideration, the direct questions were removed to allow for more consistency in the interviews. Nine scenarios with questions were then developed to test my participants knowledge in different areas and to see if gender came to mind when they heard the circumstances of certain situations. I practiced the interviews with these scenarios, reevaluated them, and made changes where necessary to have the most valuable questions available to ask my participants. I narrowed down my participants to being UNCP students. Demographic questions were then developed in order to better interpret the results of the interviews and see if any patterns were represented in certain groups. These questions measured characteristics that could impact whether a person is more knowledgeable about the effect of gender on work and workplace policies: age, gender, where they are from, major, and work experience.

After these preparations were made, I began recruiting my participants. For two weeks, I approached people individually in the library and the University Center and asked them if they were busy. If they were not, I would proceed to ask them to participate in my research. Those who agreed would sign a consent form. After that, I would ask each person each question and type their answers into a Google form. At the end of the interviews, I would ask them if they wanted to know the answers to the questions. If they did, I would go through each question explaining the answer while also answering any further questions my participants had. Before leaving, I provided each participant with a debriefing sheet they could use to get further information on the subjects discussed or to contact help if they experienced any emotional distress.

Once all of the data was collected, I went through each question individually to see how many people answered it correctly, what those who answered incorrectly chose as answers, what was the most common answer, and what were the demographic factors of the people who answered correctly and incorrectly. For

those questions that participants answered with numbers, I also wanted to see the range of answers from lowest to highest. I then looked at each participants results to see who answered the most questions correctly and the demographics of participants who answered the same way.

### Findings

The results of the interviews matched my expectations in some ways but also surprised me in others. I interviewed 15 students between the ages of 18 and 30, the median age being 20. Eight identified themselves as female, while seven identified as male. Eleven of the participants are from North Carolina. There were eleven participants who said that they had job experience. There are 12 individual questions. The highest score is 9 out of 12 while the lowest is 3 out of 12. The most common score is 5 out of 12. There were no significant trends to clearly differentiate reasons why participants may have answered a certain way based on the demographic characteristics.

The following are my findings from each individual scenario:

*1. Mellissa and Mark went to the same university. They both studied the same major, graduated with the same degree, and entered the same company. They are both in entry level positions with the same salary. After 10 years, Mark is a manager within the company while Mellissa is one of several supervisors that Mark manages. What are possible reasons for this?* This question had multiple possible answers. It could be that Mellissa did not have as much opportunity for advancement, she may have taken time off for family. It is also possible that Mark may have had a better work ethic. This scenario was presented to see if the first thing that came to the participants mind was gender. Twelve out of fifteen of the participants gave an answer that implied that gender was a contributing factor to the situation. One participant stated, "The company entrusts Mark for his hard work. It could be that the company loves Mellissa, but he's the better candidate because people tend to take men more seriously." This was a common reasoning among the participant.

*2. Is there a problem with the following scenario and, if so, what is it: Angela is in the second round of interviews for a job. The interviewers have responded well to what they have seen on her resume. They ask Angela questions about her experiences with juggling work, family, and marriage. They also ask her about her goals for the future and what she thinks of the organization.* This question was presented to see if participants knew what is and is not appropriate to be asked or talked about during an interview. Interviewers are not allowed to ask about marital or family situations and interviewees should not volunteer that information. Five out of fifteen participants said that there was a problem with the situation. Many of them, three out of five, reasoned that there was a problem because this line of questioning would not be asked to male candidates. One said, "It's an issue if they don't ask those questions to the male candidates." Several similarly stated that as long as both women and men are asked then this line of questioning is appropriate.

*3. Lisa and Thomas are married and work for the same company. They qualify for FMLA. Lisa is pregnant and goes on maternity leave. How long is her maternity leave? Is Thomas entitled to paternity leave or any time off?* This question was posed to see if my participants knew what they are entitled to as an employee in many



organizations. Under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), women and men are entitled to 12 weeks unpaid leave when they are employed there 12 months, worked at least 1250 hours, and their employer employs more than 50 employees within a 75 mile radius. This is the minimum required by law. Two people correctly answered 12 weeks or 3 months for maternity leave. The answers ranged from 30 days to 1-2 years, with the median being 4 months. Ten out of fifteen participants said that Thomas is entitled to time off. One said, "Her maternity leave should be however long the mother needs up to one year. Thomas should get paternity leave." There was common train of thought among my participants that women either take the length of their pregnancy in maternity leave or as long as they want. They were also more comfortable saying that Thomas should get time off but not paternity leave.

*4. Peter is applying for work at ten different million dollar businesses. Out of the ten, based on statistics, how many of these businesses do you predict are owned by women?* This scenario was presented to test my participants' awareness of the glass ceiling and the impact it has on women's ability to succeed. Two of the businesses in the scenario would be owned by women. Four out of fifteen participants correctly answered. The answers ranged from zero to four, with the mode being one.

*5. Terrence is very well liked in his company. Recently Terrence has been skipping work and coming in late often. He has been making mistakes in reports. Management discovers that Terrence has been busy planning his wedding to his partner Jason, whom they did not know about. Terrence is dismissed from the company. Is this situation legal?* I posed this situation to see if my participants would recognize the difference between discrimination at work and actions that are legally defensible. This situation is legally defensible. Nine out of fifteen participants said that this scenario was legal. One person said, "Technically yes because the company can state that they fired Terrence based off of his lack of attendance and low performance levels. If they fired him because he is marrying a man, then it is illegal." When focusing on the technical aspects of the situation, most of my participants stated that it was legal. However, many were still opposed to the dismissal and felt a warning would be more appropriate.

*6. Kendra has been experiencing sex based harassment at work. She is experiencing a hostile work environment and wants to do something about it. What should she do? What percentage of people who experience sexual harassment at work actually report it? Why do they not report it?* This scenario was meant to measure what my participants know about sexual harassment in the workplace and how they should handle themselves in that kind of situation. In this situation, Kendra should report it her human resources (HR) department and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Only ten percent of people who experience sexual harassment actually report it, because many do not know how to report it, they are embarrassed, or they are afraid of retaliation. Two out of fifteen participants said to report harassment to HR. The rest said to report it to either her boss, the police, or an ambiguous authority figure. One out of fifteen correctly answered ten percent, with the majority answering thirty percent. The low end was five percent and the high end was sixty percent. All answered that that Kendra would be afraid of repercussions. One said, "Not many women report it because they're scared and maybe all the boss would

say is change the clothing you're wearing. Most of the time the men still keep their job. There would be a tension between the two if she were to report it." There was agreement among all of my participants that a person would be afraid of repercussions that could make it hard for them to continue working in that organization.

7. *How often do you think men experience sexual harassment in the workplace?* This was posed to see what my participants knew about the men who experience sexual harassment in the workplace. Of the sexual harassment cases brought forward for investigation, 15.9% belong to men (EEOC). None of the participants answered within 4 points of the correct answer. The lowest was one percent, while the highest was fifty percent. The mode answer was thirty percent.

8. *Jordan goes in for an initial interview for a position in a company. Jordan's appearance is gender ambiguous. The interviewer is unsure and asks for Jordan's gender identity in order to better understand and communicate. Is this legal?* This was another test to see if my participants knew what could be asked of them during an interview. An interviewer is not allowed to ask about an interviewee's gender identity. Ten out of fifteen participants said that this situation was legal, with one saying, "I think in any job position the boss should know what gender you go by and it should be stated in the application Jordan filled out. That way it won't be awkward to ask." Many believed that this was legal because the intentions of the interviewer seem pure or because it is something you have to provide to apply for a job.

9. *Jon is one of your best salespeople: high volume of sales, clients love him, never broken a rule. One day Jon comes to work in a dress, heels, makeup, and a wig, says he is a transgender woman, wants to be called Joanne, and use the pronouns she and her. Many clients do not want to work with Joanne and are threatening to leave the company if Joanne is not let go. How do you handle this situation?* This scenario was presented to discover if my participants could see the implications that having a newly transitioning employee would have on their business. The answer that I was looking for was that you should not fire Joanne. Joanne still has other clients and can find more. The percentage of clients who will leave your company or decide not to work with your company if you fire Joanne is greater than the group that is threatening to leave. Also, revise policies; Joanne did not feel comfortable coming to work as herself, possibly because there was not anything written about protection for her or help in her transition. Fourteen out of fifteen participants answered that they would lose the clients and keep Joanne. One stated, "Have a gender sensitivity training seminar, to help employees understand where Joanne is in their life. People are often against what they don't understand, and bringing everyone to an understanding would better soothe the uproar." The most common thought among my participants was that Joanne is a good employee and that the organization should not cater to transphobic clients.

### Implications

No participant answered every question correctly. This shows that there is a lack of knowledge on a topic that could very soon affect these students. They will be going on job interviews, working, and experiencing everything that goes along with that. Will young adults recognize the invisible hurdles placed in front of them? Will they

know how to protect themselves from discrimination in an interview? Will they know about their rights within the workplace? Will they know how to protect themselves from sexual harassment and who to contact to aid them?

The participants were not presented with these tools to help themselves. They were very unsure through the interviews and often guessed answers. It would not be to their advantage to have to guess when they are in the midst of a situation. They should be informed. Most of my participants did not know what maternity leave is. Many thought that women were given an endless supply of time. The majority of my participants did not know that in interviews, you should not talk about your marital status, family, or gender identity even if your interviewer is trying to get to know you better. It can still be used against you. Almost all of my participants only had a vague idea of what to do if they experienced sexual harassment in the workplace. Many answered that they would tell their boss, but what if this hostile work environment was being perpetrated by your boss? There are entities whose job description includes handling these situations, but that would be useless if a person does not know to contact them.

There are classes and seminars that teach young adults skills that will help them survive in the adult world, like personal finance. In the same vein, there should be classes and seminars available that can inform young adults about human resources practices. People who have to work for a living, like my participants, have a chance of experiencing an issue where they will need human resource knowledge or the aid of a human resource professional. They should be equipped with the tools to protect themselves when these situations arise.

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